Developing Services for Distance Learners

Custom Research Brief

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge
Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

- What services (e.g., administrative, academic, extracurricular, personal) are offered to distance learners, especially those who do not enroll in any face-to-face courses?
- Are services offered to distance learners an extension of those offered to face-to-face learners, or are they developed independently?
- What innovative practices have administrators developed to adapt services for distance learners, particularly those in the military, who take all courses online?
- What challenges have contacts encountered when tailoring services to distance learners?
- Have contacts partnered with third-party vendors to offer distance learner services? If so, how have contacts managed those partnerships?

Project Sources
- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (http://nces.ed.gov/)
I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Parameters

The Council targeted its outreach to administrators who oversee distance learner services at institutions with robust distance learning programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Mountain West: Midsize City</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>20,000/17,300</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Northeast: Large City</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>33,000/18,700</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic: Fringe Town</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>9,400/7,400</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Midwest: Distant Town</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>28,300/21,600</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Mountain West: Midsize City</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30,200/22,800</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College F</td>
<td>Northeast: Small City</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>32,000/30,500</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University G</td>
<td>South: Large City</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>21,000/13,800</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University H</td>
<td>Pacific West: Small City</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>23,800/19,600</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University I</td>
<td>South: Large Suburb</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>56,000/48,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University J</td>
<td>Midwest: Midsize City</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>5,200/3,200</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University K</td>
<td>Pacific West: Distant Town</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26,000/22,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Key Observations

- All distance learners seek robust administrative and academic services; those in graduate programs and in the military express little demand for extracurricular and personal services. Administrative services (e.g., admission, financial aid, course registration) are the easiest to align with existing campus offices. Contacts do not usually coordinate extracurricular services unless students demand them.

- To maximize retention, administrators should offer pre- and post-enrollment advising that clarifies distance learner expectations, helps distance learners determine which program is the best fit for their goals, and monitors their progress through the course of the program. Students who struggle to receive answers to their questions may grow frustrated and leave the program. Pre-enrollment advisors are usually housed in the distance learning division and help distance learners understand various program components. Once a distance learner enrolls, program coordinators often act as their main point of contact. They answer questions, direct students to available services, and offer advice if a student struggles.

- Administrators who believe distance and face-to-face learners experience similar needs often partner with existing offices to offer services; those who view distance learner needs as distinct from those of face-to-face students typically develop parallel services within the distance learning division. Most institutions integrate administrative services and develop distance-learner specific advising services. Distance learners often balance busy schedules (e.g., full-time work, family commitments) and can easily switch institutions if they feel their needs are not being met. Consequently, contacts emphasize that advisors and instructors should respond to student requests quickly (usually within 24 hours) and provide access to services outside of business hours.

- Administrators who seek to attract distance learners in the military should ensure that advisors are familiar with military culture (e.g., understand what academic programs align well with military skills, offer advice on GI Bill benefits). Contacts mention that for-profit institutions aggressively recruit military students since GI Bill funding does not count toward the cap on federal revenue that for-profits face. They suggest administrators at non-profit institutions build expertise in a program (e.g., master’s in criminal justice) for military distance learners and seek to maximize market share within that niche.
III. Distance Learner Services

Distance Learner Needs

Student services fall under four primary categories: administrative, academic, extracurricular, and personal. All distance learners demand robust administrative and academic services; contacts report little to no demand from distance learners for extracurricular or personal services. While contacts remain open to the development of additional services, they often hesitate to do so until demand exists. The following tables describe how administrators tailor services to distance learners.

Administrative Services

These are essential to the operation of a distance learning division and often the easiest to align with existing services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Description of Service</th>
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</table>
| Admission                       | ✓ **Employ a dedicated admission officer**: One point of contact within the admission office usually tracks applications from distance learners. This minimizes the chance that a distance learner receives incorrect information.  
✓ **Task academic departments with admission oversight**: For distance learning programs based within academic departments, the department manages admission decisions.  
✓ **Partner with a third-party vendor**: Administrators may consider the use of vendors to manage marketing and recruitment for their most popular distance learning programs. This can help staff focus on serving enrolled students. Contacts at University B use the vendor Embanet-Compass Knowledge Group to compile and submit applications on behalf of students. The company receives a portion of the student’s tuition revenue. |
| Financial Aid                   | ✓ **Employ a dedicated financial aid officer**: Contacts at University C house a financial aid representative and assistant within the distance learning division. This helps ensure that all student questions are answered in a timely manner.  
✓ **Ensure staff are familiar with GI Bill benefits**: If an institution seeks to target distance learning programs toward active-duty military personnel and veterans, staff in the financial aid office, veterans’ center, or distance learning division, should understand how to navigate GI Bill benefits. |
| Course Registration             | ✓ **Use a campus-wide registration system**: The majority of institutions manage course registration online for all students, including distance learners. The system should operate in real-time, meaning that courses accurately list the number of open seats available. If distance learners struggle to enroll in the right classes, they are less likely to complete the program.  
✓ **Provide registration assistance**: Distance learning division staff and academic advisors answer questions about which courses students should register for; technical support can help students who encounter problems with the system. |
## III. Distance Learner Services

### Academic Services

Distance learners most value these services, which directly help students progress toward their degree. All contacts employ distance learning advisors to monitor student progress, intervene if a student struggles, and help students stay on track for graduation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Description of Service</th>
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</table>
| Advising        | ✓ Provide general advising: Staff within the distance learning division often provide basic information (e.g., the number of credits required to graduate) to prospective and newly enrolled students. This helps clarify student expectations.  
✓ Employ program-specific advisors: Program coordinators, based in the distance learning division or academic department, help distance learners navigate program requirements and stay on track toward their degrees.  
✓ Share funding with academic departments: University E offers academic departments who wish to grow distance learning enrollment a three-year deal. The distance learning division covers all advising costs in year one, the division and department equally share advising costs in year two, and the department covers all advising costs in year three. The initiative pays for itself through increased tuition revenue. |
| Tutoring        | ✓ Engage with the campus writing center: Distance learners at University D can upload a paper to the writing center’s website. A tutor based in the English department provides feedback within 24 hours. The distance learning division pays the writing center per distance learner who uses the service. These services are especially helpful for students who need remedial help.  
✓ Use synchronous tools: Campus-based tutors conduct live tutoring sessions through instant messaging and Skype, which more closely mirrors the face-to-face tutoring experience. Administrators should ensure that all tutors receive the same training so that services for face-to-face and distance learners are of similar quality.  
✓ Partner with a third-party vendor: Many contacts work with the online tutoring service SmarThinking, Inc. if campus offices cannot assist distance learners. |
| Library Resources | ✓ Provide electronic access: Many institutions allow all students to access library databases electronically. Through interlibrary loan agreements, a distance learner may receive books at a library or institution close to where he or she lives. Students may hesitate to access library resources unless reminded by an instructor.  
✓ Chat with librarians: Librarians are often available by email or an instant messenger to help students locate resources. Librarians should be available during evening and weekend hours to accommodate distance learners’ schedules. |
| Career Center   | ✓ Create a web portal: Many institutions publicize career and internship information electronically for all students. Podcasts, video footage of campus presentations, and email-based resume and cover letter reviews help engage distance learners who are unable to attend face-to-face events.  
✓ Use a web camera: Career center staff conduct mock interviews with distance learners through web cameras. In addition, recruiters who come to campus conduct actual interviews the same way.  
✓ Organize a virtual career fair: A group of recruiters log in, remotely or on campus, to the career center portal and chat with distance learners about internship or employment opportunities. This informs students of post-degree opportunities.  
✓ Reach out to local alumni: Career center staff invite alumni to post their employment and geographic information and connect with distance learners virtually or in-person. |
### Extracurricular Services

Distance learners in graduate programs or in the military express little demand for these services, since their primary focus is often academics. Others, primarily undergraduate distance learners, may seek such services to help build community within the program.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Description of Service</th>
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</table>
| **Student Government**               | ✓ **Invite distance learners to participate in campus-wide student government:** The student government at University J has an online student senator. Elections are held online and SGA information is communicated through email. One-third of the institution’s students are distance learners, and an additional one-third enroll in both online and face-to-face courses. Representation helps integrate distance learners into the institution and ensure their needs are met.  
✓ **Create a distance learning-specific student government:** Distance learners at University K have formed an online student government. Members meet online through synchronous tools and are provided a portion of tuition revenue, which they allocate to student events (e.g., online seminars and workshops, group outings to institutional athletic events for local distance learners). Contacts believe the organization’s success in connecting students stems in part from the fact that its creation was driven by students, not staff. |
| **Clubs and Student Organizations**  | ✓ **Post a social discussion board:** Contacts at University B include a discussion board in the learning management system for students to exchange suggestions about coursework, employment, and balancing school with outside commitments. This can help foster community among distance learners, although contacts say few students actively participate.  
✓ **Use social media:** Most contacts maintain some social media presence (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube). Contacts at University H stream video of campus events, presentations, and seminars to figuratively bring distance learners to campus. This helps build a sense of connection between students and the institution.  
✓ **Link distance learners to campus clubs:** Infrequently, distance learners inquire about student clubs on campus. If students seek information about a particular type of organization, distance learning staff provide contact information for relevant campus clubs. Interested distance learners primarily interact with club members through email. One student organization at University H has a web camera in its meeting space to broadcast meetings to distance learners. Increased engagement between distance and face-to-face learners can deepen the educational experience for both. |
### III. DISTANCE LEARNER SERVICES

#### Personal Services
With the exception of veterans’ services, contacts report no demand from distance learners for these services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Description of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
<td>✓ Provide a student insurance plan: If an institution offers health insurance to its face-to-face students, distance learning administrators can examine whether they may extend the same plan to distance learners. Contacts do not report demand for insurance, since many distance learners obtain coverage through their employer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Counseling Center       | ✓ Post resources online: Regulation requires counselors have a license to practice in the state in which the patient resides. Since distance learners may live anywhere, counseling services are extremely difficult to provide. Administrators post resources (e.g., personal screening tools, hotline telephone numbers) on the distance learning website for students to use if they seek help.  
                           ✓ Watch for warning signs: Distance learning staff and faculty should remain alert to signs that a student is struggling (e.g., lack of participation in courses, missed assignments). Students may hesitate to ask for help. Contacts recommend that staff and faculty proactively monitor students to address concerns before the student feels he or she needs to drop out of the program. Contacts can track such information using a student information system such as Banner or student conduct software such as Maxient. |
| Veterans’ Center        | ✓ Create a virtual veterans’ center: Contacts at College F are developing a virtual space for military and veteran students. It will include message boards for prospective students, enrolled students, and alumni that address topics such as the transition to civilian life and career options. This resource will help staff support students and students support each other.  
                           ✓ Engage with the campus veterans’ center: The distance learning website should link to campus resources for veterans, especially if distance learning staff are unfamiliar with military matters such as the GI Bill. This helps ensure that military students have the support they need. |
| Financial Literacy      | ✓ Offer online courses and presentations: Administrators can provide financial literacy courses through an organization such as CashCourse. If an institution provides financial literacy services to face-to-face students, administrators stream video of guest speakers’ lectures and presentations. Staff can create a series of videos to post online that focus on financial management topics. Such information helps prepare a student for life post-graduation, even if it does not relate directly to his or her degree.  
                           ✓ Provide financial literacy advising: Financial advisors, whether independent or employed by the institution, offer guidance on financial planning to distance learners through instant messaging or Skype. |
| Recreational Activities/Gym | ✓ Allow gym access upon special request: No contacts provide recreational activities for distance learners and none report that demand exists. Distance learners often do not pay the same student fees as face-to-face learners and are technically not eligible to use student fee-funded facilities, such as a gym. If a distance learner happened to be in the area and requested use of the gym, contacts mention they would likely accommodate the student but have never encountered such a request. |
### Integration with Existing Services

Contacts who believe distance and face-to-face learners experience similar needs often partner with existing offices to offer services. Those who view the needs of distance learners as distinct from face-to-face learners typically separate services. Most contacts do not solely follow one approach; rather, they prioritize based on resources and importance which services to unify and which to separate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrated Services</th>
<th>Separate Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Provides many hybrid or core courses</td>
<td>✓ Provides many degree programs rather than individual courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Enrolls many face-to-face learners</td>
<td>✓ Primarily enrolls distance learners with no face-to-face requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Focuses on undergraduate students</td>
<td>✓ Focuses on graduate or non-traditional students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance learning staff:</td>
<td>Distance learning staff:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Help existing student services staff adapt services for distance learners (e.g., admissions)</td>
<td>✓ Develop services in-house (e.g., orientation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Refer distance learners to existing student services staff</td>
<td>✓ Contract with third-party vendors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Manage all communication with existing student services staff on behalf of distance learners (e.g., distance learning staff email a question to the admission office and pass the response to the distance learner).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Characteristics of the Distance Learning Division**

**Management of Services for Distance Learners**

**Rationale**

If face-to-face learners vastly outnumber distance learners, student support staff typically address face-to-face student concerns first. Distance learners demand fast responses and they are more likely to fall behind or drop out if they feel their needs are not being met.

**Advantages**

Distance learning staff can more easily track student requests if they limit how often students must contact individuals outside of the distance learning division.

**Disadvantages**

This approach is resource-intensive. The distance learning division must have enough staff to ensure quick responses to questions.

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To facilitate buy-in, contacts recommend that a leader in student services—rather than the dean of distance learning—guide a discussion with service directors about how to serve distance learners.

“Relying on campus services to serve students who can transfer with the click of a button is very risky.”

-Council Interview
## IV. DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE LEARNER SERVICES

### Mapping the Life-Cycle of Student Interactions at University E

Contacts at University E are compiling a list of every interaction they have with distance learners, from a prospective student’s initial inquiry to a graduate accepting a diploma. Staff have identified each organization and individual the average student may contact throughout his or her time in the program. For graduate students, this may total 144 different interactions. Staff are examining which interactions the distance learning division can manage internally. Throughout the next year, contacts plan to reorganize the division and proactively manage as many student interactions as possible. This alignment will give staff more control to ensure that distance learners’ needs are met.

### Constant Student Engagement

Contacts emphasize the need to engage distance learners throughout their time in a program. The suggestions listed below can help maximize retention rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Prospective Students</strong></th>
<th><strong>Clarify Expectations:</strong> Pre-enrollment advisors discuss coursework and employment opportunities for each degree program to help students find the best fit. For example, a student who seeks to study environmental science but does not have the required math and science skills may find more success in a natural resources program.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newly Enrolled Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>Facilitate Communication:</strong> Contacts at University C give applicants an institutional email address to prevent institutional messages from going to the spam box of a personal email inbox.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Enrolled Students** | **Send a Welcome Email:** Once students enroll at University C, contacts send a detailed email with information on all student services. They advise students to save the message for future reference.  
**Provide an Online Orientation:** The online orientation at University D addresses topics such as financial aid, degree requirements, and student services. It describes how to access the tutoring and writing centers and library resources. The orientation also familiarizes students with the expectations of distance learning and instructs them to dedicate time each week toward their courses and avoid procrastination. Such advice can prevent distance learners, especially first-generation college students, from falling behind once they begin the program.  
**Remind Students of Available Services:** Students who do not walk by the campus library each day may forget it exists. Students may also feel intimidated to search databases and prefer to use Google. To encourage student use of resources, instructors and advisors should remind students about available services. For example, if an instructor assigns a research paper, he or she can invite a librarian to offer basic research strategies in a guest lecture or on the course discussion board. |
IV. DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE LEARNER SERVICES

Access to Services

Many distance learners work full-time or live in a different time zone than the institution, which can prevent them from accessing services during business hours. Administrators must ensure distance learners have access to services during evenings and weekends.

Technical Support

Most institutions maintain a 24-hour helpdesk for technical support matters. Contacts at University D hire students to staff the desk during overnight hours. Outsourcing the helpdesk may save money, but an institution likely will not want to give an outside company access to student usernames and passwords, which are among the most common requests that the helpdesk receives.

Advising and Library Resources

No institutions have the resources to operate services besides technical support 24 hours a day. Nevertheless, distance learning staff and librarians are often available outside of business hours. College F keeps extended hours on Monday and Wednesday, with some program offices open until 8 p.m. or later. Librarians there are available for 12 hours per day. Librarians at University D are available at least one weekend afternoon.

Quick Response Times

Distance learners expect quick answers to their questions. Students who struggle to receive answers to their questions, whether academic or administrative, may become frustrated with the lack of support and leave the program. Contacts say this is sometimes difficult to convey to faculty members, especially those accustomed to teaching face-to-face students. They offer the following suggestions to help administrators explain to faculty the importance of a timely response to distance learner questions:

- **Communication via phone and email is the only way for distance learners to engage with faculty.** Distance learners cannot drop by during faculty office hours to ask a question.
- **Faculty are only responsible for academic requests.** To save time, faculty can refer administrative concerns (e.g., problems with the learning management system, questions about financial aid) to advisors and focus on student questions related to the course content.
- **Distance learners may have commitments that impact when they can focus on schoolwork:** For example, active-duty military students may have intermittent internet access. They must make the most use out of their limited time to complete coursework.
### V. Considerations for Distance Learners in the Military

**Meeting Military Student Needs**

Contacts describe that the needs of military students mirror those of all distance learners. However, competition among distance learning providers for military students is fierce, and for-profit institutions aggressively target military students. For-profits face a cap on the amount of federal funding they can count as revenue, but money they receive through the GI Bill does not count toward this cap. With larger budgets, these organizations can afford to operate extensive marketing and recruitment campaigns. Contacts offer the following suggestions for non-profit institutions that seek to tap into the market of military students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maintain a Military Presence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacts at College F have developed partnerships with the military through programs such as GoArmyEd. In addition, the institution has 17 field representatives at military bases around the country. These individuals offer on-site advising, degree planning, and preliminary transfer credit evaluation. This personal, pre-enrollment contact helps increase retention. Students who select a program that best fits their needs and enroll with clear expectations are more likely to graduate. Initially, contacts should begin outreach with local military bases, where the institution may already have name recognition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify a Niche Program for Military Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rather than spread resources among a variety of programs for military students, contacts advise that administrators identify a program in which they already excel (e.g., master’s in criminal justice) and tailor it to military students. Administrators can use the institution’s expertise in that program to distinguish itself from the competition. This narrows the recruitment pool from all military students to military students interested in criminal justice. If the program offers high-quality coursework and is proven to help students launch careers in the industry, more students from that recruitment pool are likely to enroll.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adapt Programs to Military Student Needs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many distance learning administrators who work with military students either served in the military or are familiar with military culture. They understand the pressures that a military student faces and can help tailor programs to meet students’ needs. For example, contacts at College F offer CD-Rom courses to accommodate active-duty students who may not have a regular internet connection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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